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ABSTRACT

This research brief presents the results of a year 2000 survey of community college senior administrators. The study examines career paths and backgrounds, as well as the mechanisms administrators used to upgrade their skills and acquire additional knowledge and training. Results indicate that: (1) the most likely previous position of community college presidents was provost (37%), followed by president of another community college (25%) and senior academic affairs/instruction officer (15%); (2) 22% of presidents were promoted to the presidency from within their institution, and 66% came from other community colleges; (3) women were underrepresented in certain administrative positions, most notably the offices of president (only 27% women) and occupational or vocational education officer (29% women); (4) 84% of administrators were White, 6% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 1% Asian or Native American; and (5) 41% had a Master's as their highest-earned degree, 18% an Ed.D., and 19% a Ph.D. This brief concludes that the path to the presidency is changing. Much work remains to be done in generating candidate pools for senior positions, in equipping younger generations of administrators with the skills and experiences that will help them win promotion, and in ensuring equity in promotion into the most senior positions. (EMH)

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Career Paths for Community College Leaders
Executive Summary
Leadership Series
AACC Research Brief

Marilyn J. Amey and Kim E. VanDerLinden

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RESEARCH BRIEF

No. 2
Leadership Series

AACC-RB-02-2

Career Paths for Community College Leaders

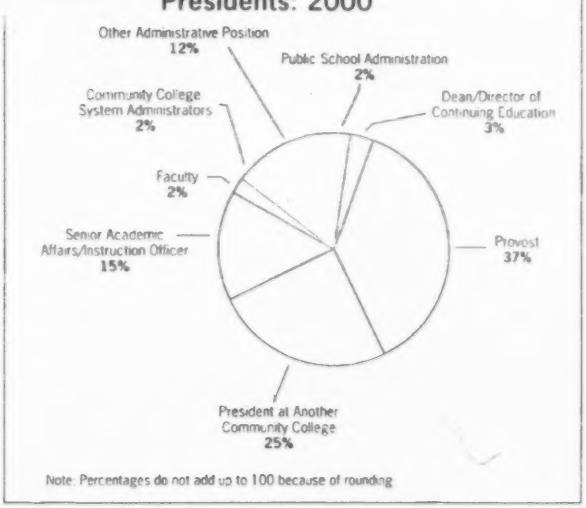
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With about four-fifths of incumbent community college presidents planning to retire within 10 years (Weisman and Vaughan 2002), leadership development is now an essential focus for community colleges. Successful colleges of the future will be the ones that today are cultivating new generations of leaders at all administrative levels. Community colleges must consider not only the presidency but also the range of career positions including administrators, faculty, and staff. This research brief presents the results of a 2000 survey of community college senior administrators; the study examined career paths and backgrounds as well as the mechanisms administrators used to upgrade their skills and acquire additional knowledge and training.

Highlights of survey results:

- The most likely previous position of community college presidents was provost (37 percent), followed by president of another community college (25 percent) and senior academic affairs/ instruction officer (15 percent) (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Immediate Past Positions of Presidents: 2000



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding

- 22 percent of presidents were promoted to the presidency from within their institution; 66 percent came from other community colleges. Chief academic officers were more likely to be promoted from within their institution (52 percent) than to be hired from another community college (28 percent).

- Women were underrepresented in certain administrative positions, most notably the offices of president (27 percent women), occupational or vocational education director (29 percent women), and chief financial officer (30 percent women).

- 22 percent of the surveyed senior administrators had attended or completed a degree at a community college.

- 56 percent of administrators indicated they had a mentor.

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Objectives of This Research Brief

For community colleges, a period of increased growth and organizational diversification is becoming even more challenging because of unprecedented faculty, staff, and administrative turnover (Shults 2001). Community colleges, with their diverse missions and constituencies, cannot afford to maintain status-quo assumptions about their prospective leadership pool. To ensure diversity and more accessible leadership as well as to ensure vacancies are filled by competent staff, community colleges must consider nontraditional sources of candidates for executive positions, such as newly organized or rapidly growing units of their academic or administrative structure.

This research brief examines the career paths and backgrounds of senior administrators in traditional positions such as chief academic officer and senior student affairs officer, as well as those of administrators in continuing education, occupational education, and business and industry divisions. This brief also examines preparation for administrative careers and mechanisms for upgrading skills and acquiring additional knowledge and training.

Methodology

The research reported here comes from national survey data collected in 2000. In part, the survey replicated a study conducted in the early 1980s by Moore, Martorana, and Twombly (1985). The study, *Today's Academic Leaders: A National Study of Administrators in Two-Year Colleges*, provided systematic analyses of two-year administrative careers and various analyses of internal and external labor market issues (Twombly 1986, 1988). It stands as one of the most comprehensive career snapshots of a full range of community college administrators.

Our 2000 survey instrument consisted of 34 open-ended response, closed-ended response, and Likert-scale questions. We adapted the Moore et al. (1985) survey for language and terminology in order to provide data for direct comparison. We also constructed some additional questions. Our additions represent current trends, issues, and focus areas of community college leaders, and are based on an extensive literature review of other key administrative studies and instruments.

A stratified random sample of 1,700 community college administrators across 14 position codes was drawn from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) data bank, providing representation by geographic location, by urban and rural locale, and by single-campus and multicampus sites. Data collection efforts yielded a 54 percent usable survey response rate.

Abbreviations for Position Titles

Pres: Chancellor, president, provost, or other official with overall responsibility for the district, college, or campus
CAO: Administrative official responsible for academic program of the institution
SSAO: Official responsible for the full range of student services, including testing, placement, and counseling
CFO: Administrative official responsible for business and financial affairs, including purchasing, accounting, and investments
CE: Director responsible for continuing and adult education programs
OVE: Official responsible for all occupational and technical programming
BIL: Official responsible for developing partnerships with local business and industry, including the development of customized job-training programs and community economic development

Career Trajectories

President

The career trajectories of incumbent presidents reflect traditional academic administrative backgrounds, including past presidencies, as well as a growing proportion of backgrounds in nonacademic college administration. Most survey respondents held immediate past positions in what would be considered the traditional senior leadership path: provost (37 percent), president at another community college (25 percent), or senior academic affairs or senior instruction officer (15 percent). Three percent held a dean's position or the position of director of continuing education, whereas 12 percent held other administrative positions, such as senior student affairs officer or vice president for institutional planning and advancement. A small percentage of presidents were promoted directly from faculty ranks (2 percent) or from public school administration (2 percent). An additional 2 percent of presidents came from community college system boards. None of the survey respondents came to the presidency from a private-sector position (Figure 1).

Some differences exist between the career paths of presidents in 2000 and those of presidents in 1985, although the largest percentages from both studies followed traditional academic administration career paths. The percentages of past presidents and provosts are higher in the current study than those found in the Moore et al. (1985) study (17 percent were past presidents and 9 percent were provosts in the 1985 study), whereas the percentage of presidents being promoted from within the hierarchies of chief academic officer in 1985 was 27 percent. In 1985, 5 percent of presidents studied came directly from the faculty, and 13 percent came directly from public school settings.

For respondents to the 2000 survey, movement among institutions rather than development of a career within a single institution seems to characterize the career paths that led to the presidency. Only 22 percent of presidents were promoted from within their present institution, whereas 66 percent were hired from other community colleges; 12 percent came to the presidency from other sectors, including four-year colleges and public schools (Figure 2). As their careers progressed, most survey respondents seemed to spend no more than five years in each position on the path to the presidency. For example, 57 percent of presidents were employed in their current positions for five years or fewer; 66 percent were in their first previous positions for five years or fewer; and 63 percent were in their second previous positions for five years or fewer.

Thirty-three percent of all presidents held positions at four-year institutions at one time earlier in their careers before moving to the community college sector, often as faculty or department chairs or as program directors. Seventeen percent of presidents reported having professional experience in the public schools at some point in their career (Figure 3).

Chief Academic Officer

Obtaining credentials through traditional academic administration still appears to be important for promotion to chief academic officer (CAO) positions. More than 50 percent of CAOs held immediate past positions with similar titles such as assistant or associate dean of instruction. The emergence of administrative backgrounds in other areas, however, suggests an alternative acceptable career trajectory. Ten percent of CAOs came from positions in continuing or vocational education, whereas 18 percent came from immediate past positions in student affairs, learning resources, institutional development, and other nonacademic administrative positions. Only 7 percent of administrators were promoted directly from faculty roles, and just 6 percent came from outside academe.

FIGURE 2 **Percentage of Administrators Whose Immediate Previous Position Was at a Community College: 2000**

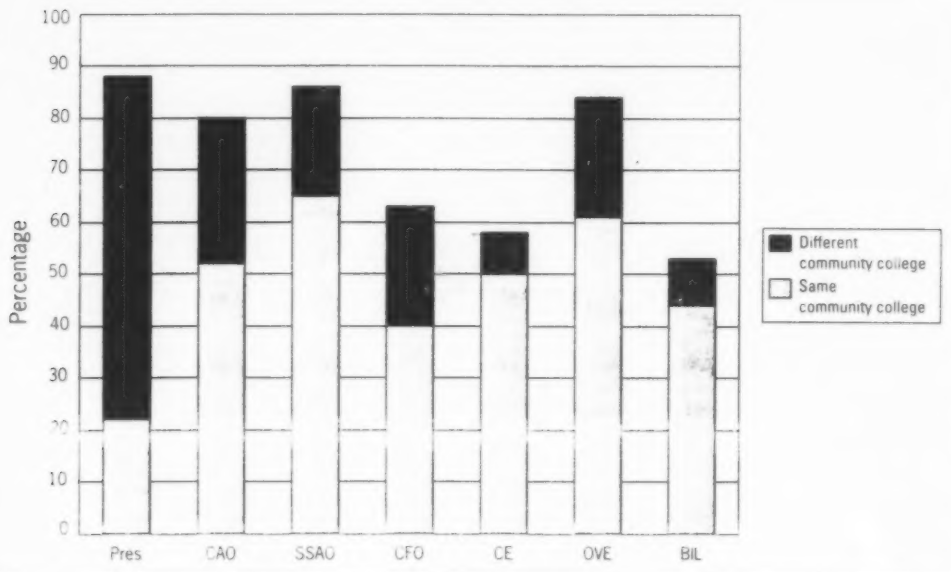
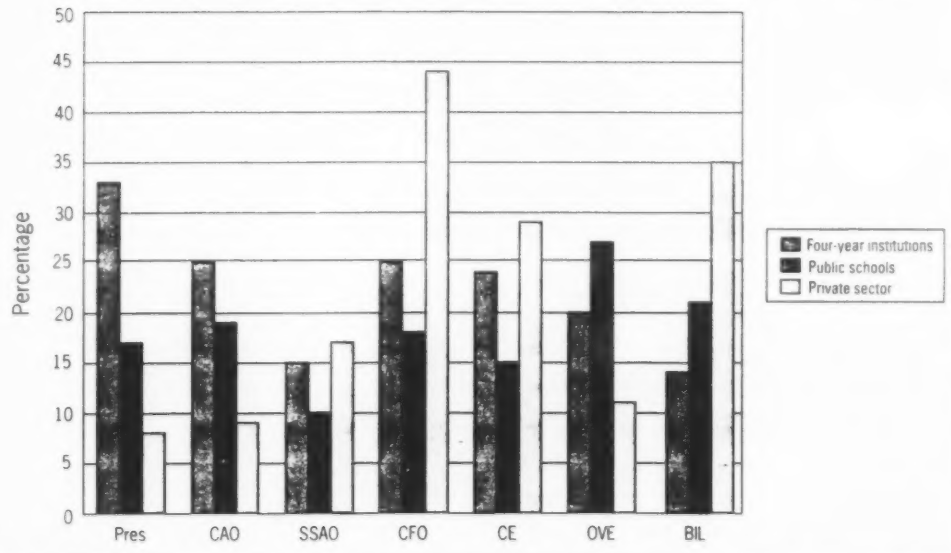


FIGURE 3 **Percentage of Administrators with Work Experience at Four-Year Institutions, at Public Schools, and in the Private Sector: 2000**



These career paths reflect substantial shifts from those represented by CAOs in the study by Moore et al. (1985). Sixty-five percent of CAOs in the earlier study came through traditional academic administrative paths, whereas only 12 percent came from other administrative routes. More CAOs came from outside academe (11 percent) and directly from faculty ranks (9 percent) in the 1985 study.

Unlike presidents, CAOs in the study were more likely to be promoted from within their institution (52 percent) than to be hired from another community college (28 percent). CAOs held positions for relatively short periods of time: 74 percent were employed in their current positions for five years or fewer. Twenty-five percent held positions at four-year institutions at one point in their careers, and 19 percent had backgrounds in public schools.[1]

Senior Student Affairs Officer

Senior student affairs officers (SSAO) followed a traditional career path; most often they were promoted from within the division. Fifty-three percent of SSAOs had immediate past positions with similar titles, such as associate or assistant dean of student services. Nineteen percent were directors of counseling. Eleven percent came directly from academic administration with immediate past positions that included dean of instruction, whereas 12 percent were in other administrative positions such as positions in continuing education, development, and institutional research. Two percent came directly from public schools.

Moore et al. found similar career paths for SSAOs in 1985. However, 7 percent of SSAOs in 1985 came directly from faculty ranks, whereas none in 2000 came directly from faculty ranks. A greater percentage (14 percent) came directly from public schools and from outside of academe in 1985.

In the current study, 65 percent of SSAOs were promoted from within the same community college, and 21 percent moved to their position from a different community college. An overwhelming 70 percent of respondents were employed at the same community college for 10 years or more (on average, 16 years), and SSAOs held their current position for an average of 7 years. Few SSAOs (10 percent) had public school backgrounds. Fifteen percent had worked at four-year institutions, and 17 percent had worked in the private sector at one time.

Chief Financial Officer

Chief financial officers (CFO) built trajectories within the financial network, holding a variety of job titles including business manager, comptroller or controller, auditor, and finance officer. More than 60 percent of CFOs held immediate past positions at community colleges (approximately 40 percent at the same community college and 23 percent at a different institution). Thirteen percent came directly from private-sector business and financial jobs, and 5 percent came from financial jobs in public schools. Fifty-five percent of CFOs were new to the position, in place three years or fewer, although they had been at their institutions for an average of 12 years. Many of the CFOs (44 percent) held at least one position in the private sector at some point in their career, and 18 percent held at least one position in a public school setting, often working as a business teacher or in a financial or business office.

Director of Continuing Education

Career paths of directors of continuing education (CE) varied. Most held a title of director, coordinator, or manager of one or more educational programs such as economic development, continuing education, off-campus center, and nontraditional credit programs. Most held immediate past positions at community colleges (50 percent at the same community college and 8 percent at a different community college). Thirteen percent came directly from private-sector jobs such as manager and center director. CEs, on average, were in their current positions for seven years. Twenty-nine percent of CEs had held a job in the private sector at least once in their careers, whereas 15 percent had held a position in a public school, often as an adult educator.

1 Percentages do not add up to 100 percent because of missing data.

Emerging Feeder Positions

Given the rapid institutional growth and rising rate of administrative turnover that characterize the current community college environment (Shults 2001), the career trajectories of occupational or vocational educators and business and industry liaisons require closer examination. Administrators in these two areas of organizational growth and increasing status often assume senior leadership roles in the future and move into the presidential pipeline. The 1985 study did not examine these position categories.

Director of Occupational or Vocational Education

The terminology of career education has never been exact (Cohen and Brawer 1996), as the variety of the job titles reported under this rubric in the 2000 survey indicates. Evidently, career educators at community colleges work, variously, in vocational, occupational, professional, vocational-technical, and workforce/career education.

Most occupational or vocational educators (OVE) held their immediate previous position at community colleges; 61 percent were employed at the same community college and 23 percent moved from a different community college into their current position. Forty-one percent of OVEs had traditional career paths and moved into the position directly from associate or assistant dean or director positions or from department chair positions. Nineteen percent advanced directly from instructor or faculty ranks into their current position. Only 5 percent came directly from private-sector jobs, and only 5 percent came directly from a public school setting. The remainder of OVEs held immediate previous positions at community colleges in such roles as director of student services, career counselor, director of human resources, and assistant to the president. Although the OVEs studied had been at their institution for an average of 14 years, most were relatively new to their position. Sixty-three percent of OVE respondents were in their position five years or fewer.

Twenty percent of OVEs held positions at four-year colleges at some point in their career paths, usually for a short time as a faculty member or adjunct instructor. Close to 50 percent of respondents were instructors or faculty members at community colleges at some point in their career. Twenty-seven percent had a public school background. Nine percent had a military background, and 11 percent had a nursing or medical technology background. Only 11 percent had held jobs in the private sector; typically they had worked as consultants, human resources managers, trainers, or engineers.

Business and Industry Liaison

Business and industry liaisons (BIL) had diverse professional backgrounds and varied titles, which ranged from vice president of economic development to dean of corporate and community relations to director for the Center for Business and Industry. Because of this diversity, it is unclear how functionally distinct this category is from directorships in CE and OVE. The fast emergence of the BIL position in community college hierarchies is underscored by the finding that close to 40 percent of the respondents were the first to hold their current position. In addition, 79 percent of BIL had been in their current position for five years or less.

Forty-four percent of respondents were promoted from within the same community college. Nine percent held immediate previous positions at different community colleges, 16 percent at four-year colleges, and 12 percent in the private sector. Thirty percent of respondents moved into their positions through a traditional administrative hierarchy. Sixteen percent advanced from faculty ranks, many coming from adjunct faculty positions. Only 9 percent had essentially the same title in their previous position and made lateral moves between

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institutions or within their current institution. Another 12 percent made the career move from a county or state job, such as regional coordinator for a state department or as director of a state economic development department.

More complete career trajectories showed that 21 percent of BILs had no previous college or university employment . Another 14 percent had professional experience at a four-year college, but no community college employment experience. Thirty-five percent of respondents had at least some background in private-sector work, typically as trainers or managers. Twenty-one percent worked at a public school at some point in their career, and another 20 percent had experience working in a county, state, or federal department.

Gender and Ethnic Differences in Career Trajectories

The number of women in senior administrative positions has increased since the mid 1980s, when Moore, et al. (1985) found that 16 percent of chief academic officers, 12 percent of chief business officers, and 3 percent of presidents were women. Women's representation in administrative positions, however, is still not proportionate to their presence in the classroom or in the ranks of community college faculty. Across the surveyed administrative positions, women made up approximately 46 percent of the respondents, but women remain underrepresented in certain administrative positions such as president, CFO, and OVE (Figure 4).

Few gender differences exist in career trajectories of senior administrators. Male and female administrators seem to follow similar career paths. The most notable gender differences are the average numbers of years in a position (Figure 5) and the degree to which men and women are hired into their current position from their current institution or from other sectors (Figure 6). Except for OVEs, female administrators were in their current position for fewer years than male administrators. Except for the positions of president and BIL, women were more likely than men to be promoted from within the same community college.

FIGURE 4 **Representation of Women in Senior Administrative Positions: 2000**

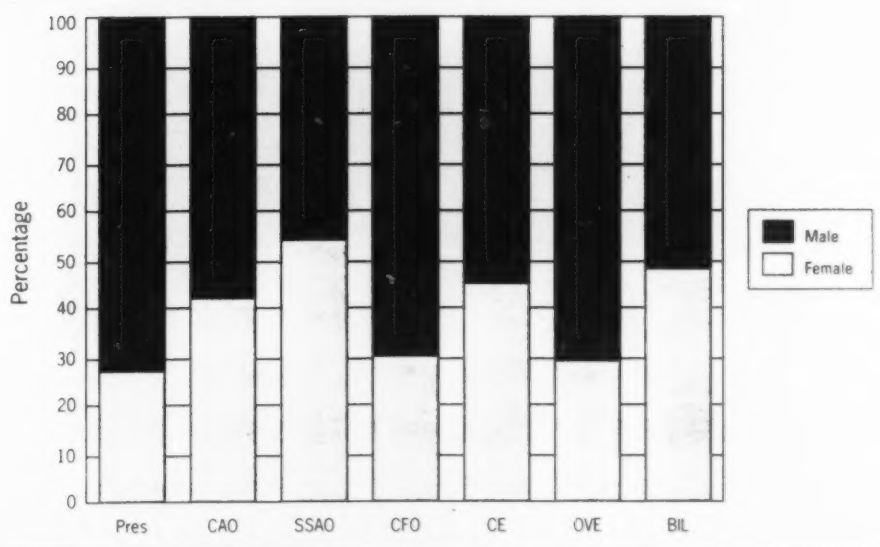


FIGURE 5 **Average Years in Current Position, by Gender: 2000**

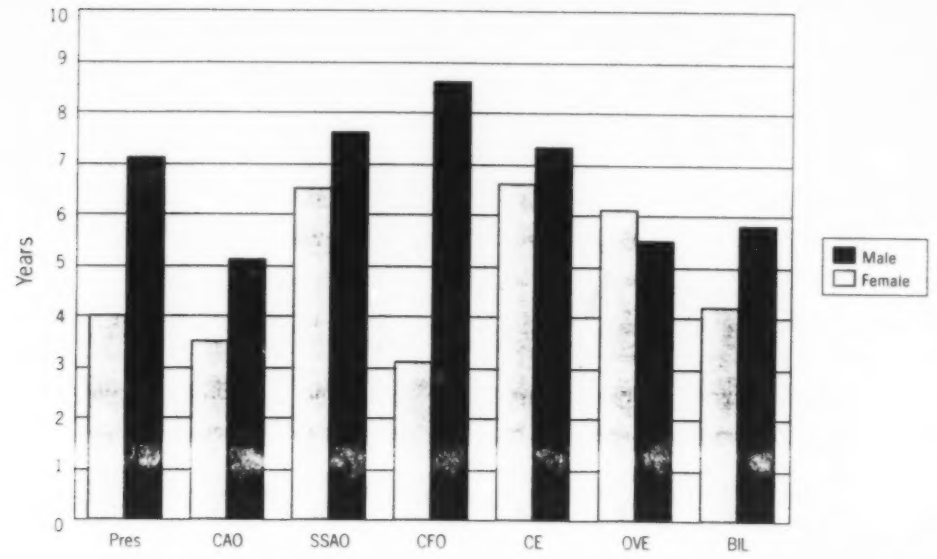
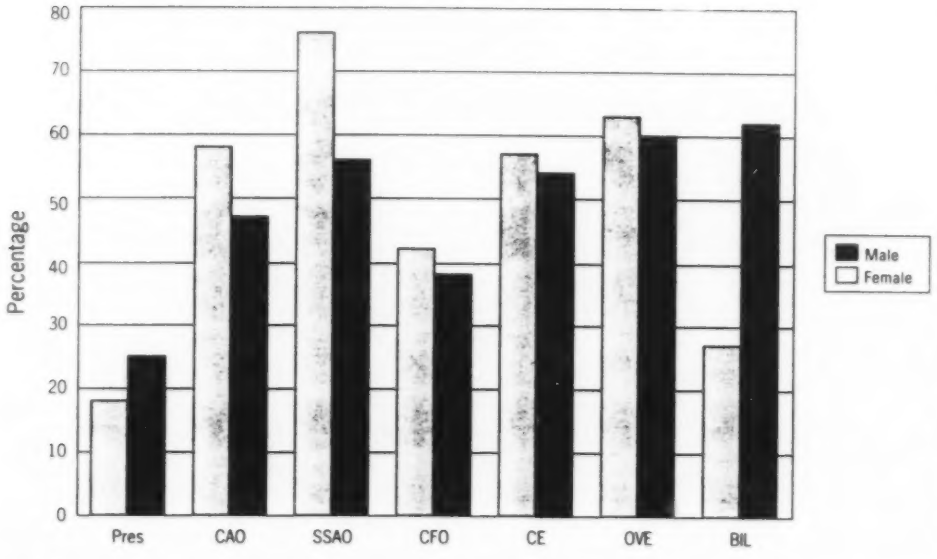


FIGURE 6 **Percentage of Administrators Hired from within Their Current Institution, by Gender: 2000**



The representation of administrators of color has not increased substantially since the mid-1980s, when Moore et al. (1985) found that 90 percent of their survey respondents were white. About 84 percent of those administrators who responded in 2000 were white (Figure 7). Because the percentage of administrators in nonwhite racial or ethnic categories was so small, a separate analysis of career paths and career issues was not feasible.

Other Administrative Positions

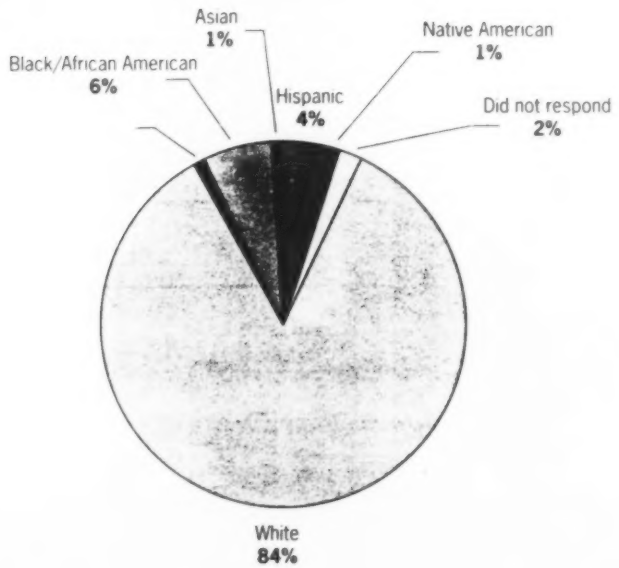
Besides the springboard positions to the community college presidency already described in this research brief, other administrative areas were represented in the data, including development and institutional advancement, human resources, learning resources, distance education, institutional research, and other student services such as enrollment management, financial aid, and minority resources. Although complete career trajectories for these positions are not presented here, data from respondents in these positions are included in the education and professional development sections.

Educational Attainment of Administrators

Forty-one percent of survey respondents indicated that an M.A., M.S., M.Ed., M.P.A., M.S.N., or M.S.W. was their highest earned degree. Seven percent have an M.B.A., and 5 percent have an M.L.S. as their highest degree. More than 18 percent have an Ed.D., and more than 19 percent have a Ph.D. (Figure 8). More than 45 percent of men in the sample have either an Ed.D. or a Ph.D.; in contrast, 20 percent of women in the sample hold such degrees (Figure 9).

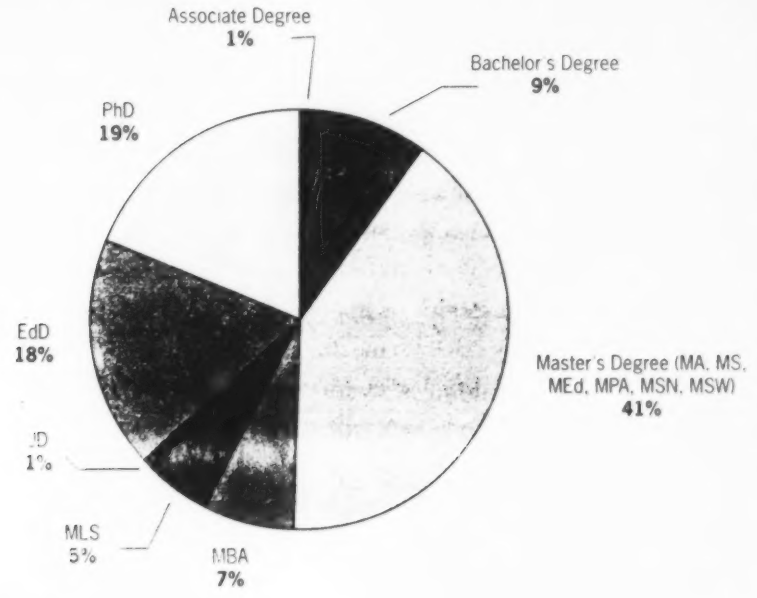
Among respondents who completed an Ed.D. or Ph.D., the most popular fields of study were higher education administration and educational leadership, as well as other education-related fields such as educational policy studies, curriculum and

FIGURE 7 **Race or Ethnicity of Administrators: 2000**



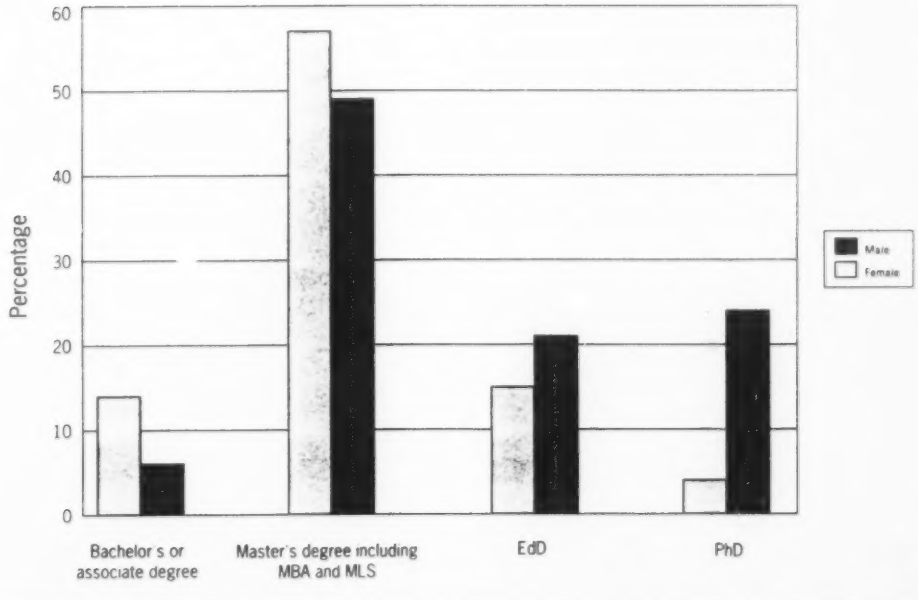
Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

FIGURE 8 **Administrators' Highest Earned Degree: 2000**



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

FIGURE 9 **Educational Attainment of Administrators, by Gender: 2000**



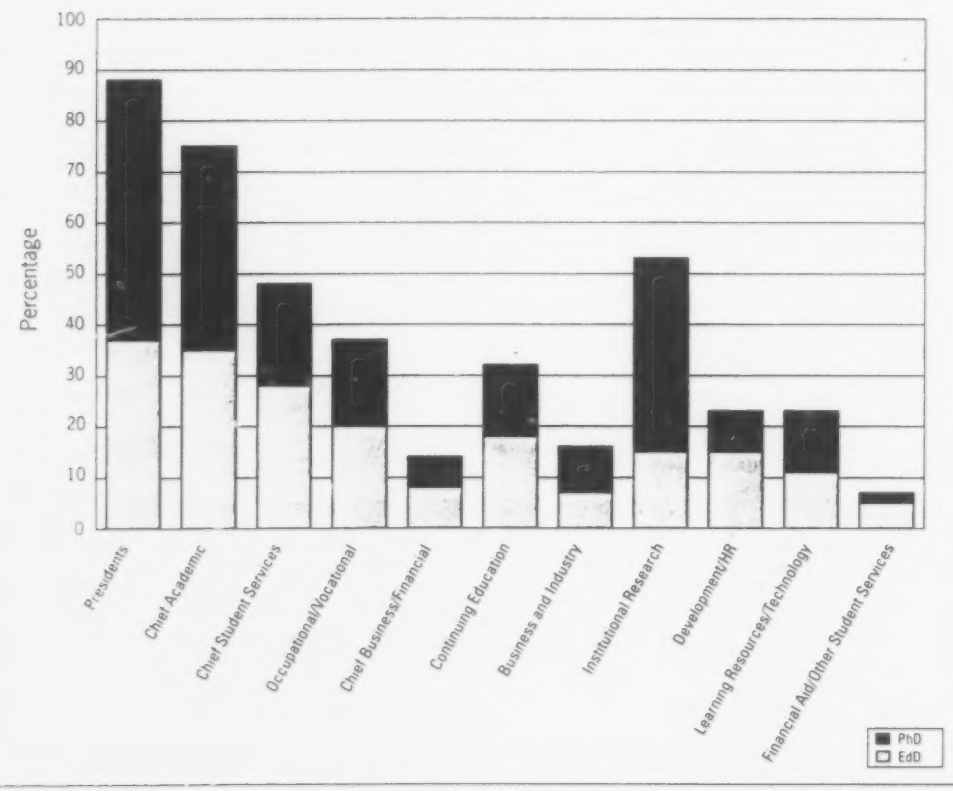
instruction, vocational or occupational education, and student personnel or counseling. Presidents and CAOs were the administrators most likely to hold a doctorate. Eighty-seven percent of presidents and 74 percent of CAOs held either an Ed.D. or a Ph.D. Among other groups of administrators, institutional researchers were more likely to hold a doctorate (Figure 10).

Of those presidents with a doctorate, 20 percent had received their degree in a liberal arts discipline, such as English, history, political science, or chemistry, whereas the remainder had received an education-related degree. Less than 2 percent of presidents with doctorates specified that their field of study was specific to community college leadership or administration.

Like the presidents, most CAOs (71 percent) held an education-related doctorate. Three percent indicated that the degree was specific to community college leadership or administration. More than 28 percent of those CAOs had doctorates in the liberal arts. History, English, math, and other sciences were the most popular disciplines.

More than 22 percent of the surveyed senior administrators had previously attended or completed a degree at a community college. Approximately 21 percent of presidents, 20 percent of CAOs, 18 percent of SSAOs, 36 percent of OVEs, 27 percent of CEs, and 34 percent of CFOs indicated that they had completed a degree program or course work at a community college.

FIGURE 10 **Percentage of Administrators with a Doctorate, by Position: 2000**



Professional Development Activities

In higher education, as in most fields, formal and informal professional development opportunities are believed to contribute to skill development and career advancement (McDade 1997).

Most of the surveyed administrators reported participating in professional development activities provided by or offered at their institution. For example, more than 95 percent of the administrators participated in institutional task forces, specialized committees, or commissions. More than 90 percent participated in staff development programs on their campus.

Although 86 percent of administrators across the surveyed positions had taken part in a formal written performance review, only about 43 percent indicated that they had participated in a career review to plan ways to acquire additional skills, education, or training. Almost 20 percent of administrators indicated that this type of career review was not available at their institution.

Administrators also have opportunities to participate in off-campus leadership development programs or specialized internships or to attend conferences at the state, regional, or national level. Small percentages of administrators in the sample reported that they had participated in highly selective and well-recognized programs, such as the League for Innovation's Executive Leadership Program and the American Council on Education Fellows Program (Figure 11). The most-reported off-campus activities were making presentations at conferences, serving on the board of directors of professional organizations, and working as a paid external consultant (Figure 12).

Unlike the participation rates in internal activities, participation rates in external professional development activities varied significantly by administrative position. Of the 12 listed external activities, administrators participated in an average of 3.2. Presidents and CAOs participated in the greatest number of external activities (4.76 and 3.67 activities, respectively), and CFOs participated in the smallest number (2.1 activities).

FIGURE 11 **Participation in Specialized Leadership Programs and Internships: 2000**

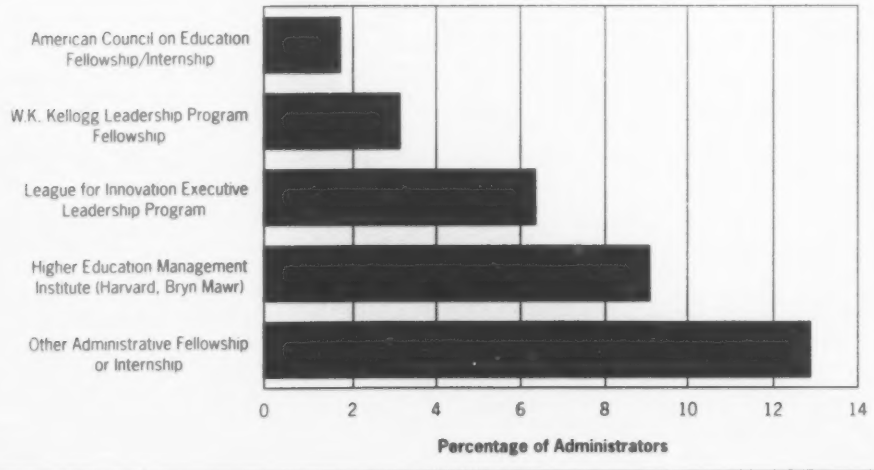
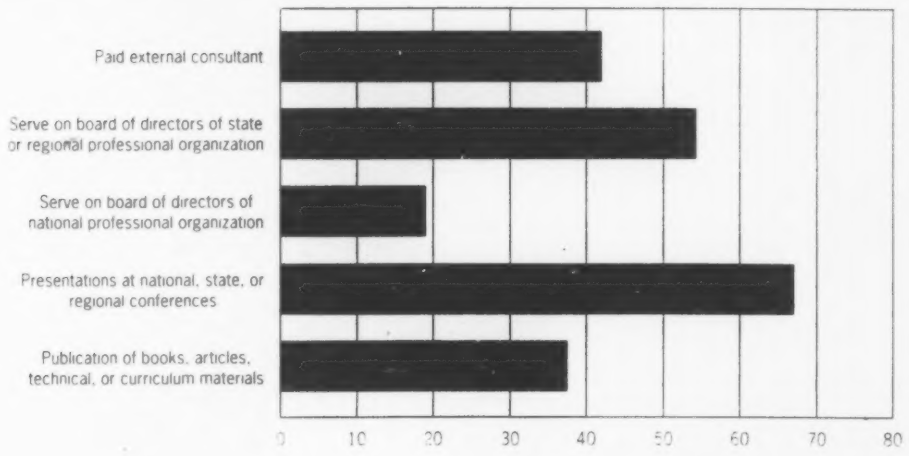


FIGURE 12 **Participation in External Professional Development Activities: 2000**



Mentoring

Respondents were asked to identify any experience with mentoring relationships—that is, long-term, professionally centered relationships between themselves and another person in which the more experienced person provided career guidance to the person with less experience. More than 56 percent indicated that they had mentors. Respondents also indicated whether they were currently mentors for someone else. Forty-two percent indicated that they were mentors for several people, whereas approximately 18 percent said they were mentors for one person (Figure 13). Approximately 36 percent of administrators said that a mentor assisted them in obtaining their current position.

Female survey respondents were more likely than male respondents to be involved in mentoring (Figure 14).

Conclusions

Career Paths Are Changing

The path to the presidency is changing. Prior presidential or other administrative experience is the norm, such experience including nonacademic positions within higher education institutions. Although administrative background is not quite as prominent among CAOs, it is still a common attribute. These findings suggest that when a president is hired today, even from the most traditional steppingstone position, he or she will probably have a different background from a president who was newly hired in 1985. Fewer presidents and senior leaders have administrative or teaching experience in the public schools than in 1985, and emerging professional steppingstones to the presidency, such as OVE and BIL, have drawn individuals with varied backgrounds in both the public and private sectors.

The data suggest that the internal hire continues to be the most common means of appointing most high-ranking community college administrators, if one understands the internal labor pool to consist of personnel who have been at the same institution for 10 years or more. During this time frame, survey respondents across most job categories experienced, on average, at least two internal job promotions, and sometimes three. The data

FIGURE 13 **Percentage of Administrators Who Mentored Others: 2000**

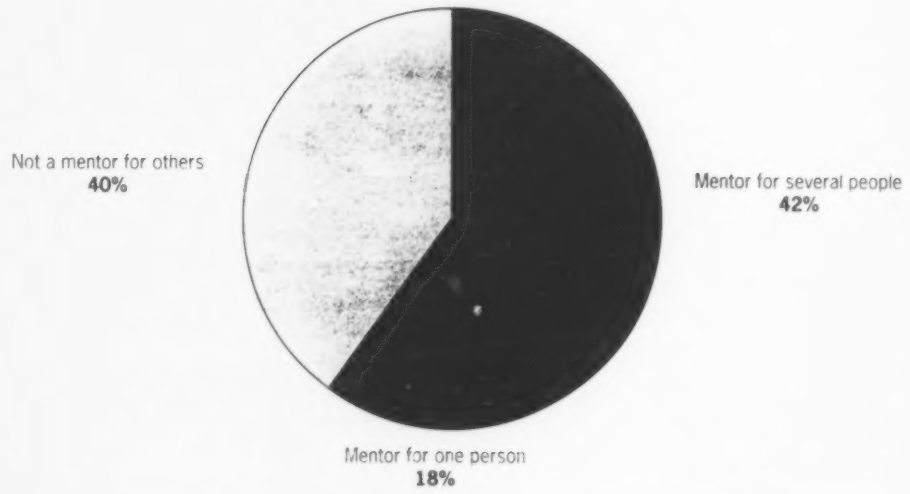
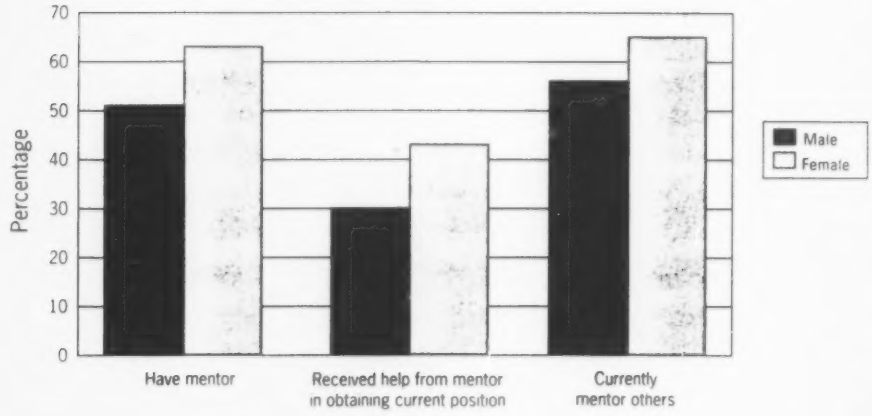


FIGURE 14 **Mentoring Activities of Administrators, by Gender: 2000**



also suggest that administrators build careers largely in community colleges, making the sector a labor market unto itself.

In light of the evidence of changing career paths, search committees need to reconsider the assumptions about publicizing open positions and generating candidate pools that traditionally have undergirded administrative search processes. Contracting with executive search agencies, an increasingly common practice, is just one of the

means search committees should consider—not only in the search for a new president, but when looking to fill other senior leadership positions.

Gender Differences

The survey showed that women were better represented in many positions than they were in 1985, although in some areas they remain severely underrepresented. Of particular note was the extent to which women were more strongly represented among CAOs in 2000 than in 1985. This change may reflect an intentional effort to increase leadership diversity over the past 20 years, but women do not yet advance to the presidency at the same rate as men. Women's lack of representation among emergent steppingstone positions to the presidency is important in that, if the path to the presidency shifts toward certain positions in which they are underrepresented such as OVE or CFO, women may lose whatever advantages in promotion they are currently experiencing. The same observation applies to administrators who are members of racial or ethnic minorities.

We were interested to see if the survey would show that growth in the proportion of senior administrators from racial and ethnic minorities would compare reasonably well to the growth in the proportion who were women. Although minority administrators provided valuable information, they were too few in number in most cases to conduct any specific analysis by race or ethnicity.

Educational Preparation

The most senior leaders—presidents and CAOs—also were the most likely to hold a doctorate. The percentage of administrators in the 2000 study who had earned a doctorate was either consistent with the 1985 study or had increased. In the case of presidents, the percentage with doctorates increased significantly, from 73 percent to 87 percent. The extent to which senior administrators now carry this credential suggests that a professional academic component comparable to the professional administrative component is important in the hiring decision. Administrators in many of the emergent steppingstone positions hold master's degrees. How this difference will affect promotion and leadership succession remains to be seen.

Professional Development

Across all studied positions, administrators are involved in a large number of professional development and networking activities. The activities with the largest participation rates were those offered on individual campuses, suggesting that institutional initiatives may play an important role in the professional lives of administrators. Institutional policies and practices related to professional development should be reviewed by examining the financial support available for administrators to take advantage of activities at the state, regional, or national level. Institutions should also consider how administrators find out about the available opportunities and whether some of these professional opportunities are limited to only a select group of administrators.

In some ways, much has changed nationally in the two decades since Moore and colleagues began collecting data for their 1985 study. Community colleges appear to be opening their doors to administrative leadership in new ways. But much work remains to be done in generating candidate pools for senior positions, in equipping younger generations of administrators with the skills and experiences that will help them win promotion, and in ensuring equity in promotion into the most senior positions. Boards of trustees and search committees that grasp that the attributes of community college leadership have changed will enter the future of career development and executive hiring less burdened by false or outdated assumptions.

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